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AUTHOR	Burns, M.S.; Midgette, K.; Leong, D.; Bodrova, E.
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ABSTRACT

This report is intended to inform policymakers, administrators, and teachers regarding the development of standards or benchmarks addressing language and literacy skills in prekindergarten programs. The report notes that although standards and benchmarks can bring clarity to what should be expected of young children, there are challenges in describing benchmarks in a way that is useful and helpful, rather than restricting and developmentally inappropriate. Two sets of standards/benchmarks were used as a model for comparison with state standards/benchmarks: the New Standards Listening and Speaking Standards, and A Framework for Early Literacy Instruction. The comparison revealed that the development of speaking and listening skills was not equally represented across states and that the language used in the standards/benchmarks reflected indecisiveness regarding which stage of development an ability should be captured. The report points out that although many states have made considerable progress in developing age-appropriate and clearly written benchmarks, the inadequate representation of language knowledge and listening/speaking skills in many states is an important omission. The findings highlight the importance of: (1) using a common language across standards/benchmarks; (2) being consistent with K-12 expectations while being developmentally appropriate; (3) being stated in terms of a specific knowledge or skill, rather than an activity; (4) being grounded in research; (5) being used with reflection, rather than followed blindly; and (6) using language that is clear and provides enough detail to help teachers understand how to organize the classroom and provide support for children's emerging knowledge and skills. (Contains 16 references.) (KB)

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Prekindergarten Benchmarks for Language and Literacy:

Progress Made and Challenges to be Met

M.S. Burns, K. Midgette, D. Leong, and E. Bodrova

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"There is a widespread lack of specificity about literacy and language development in preschool reform efforts" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, page 282). Between the ages of 3 and 4 children show rapid growth in literacy. Snow et al (1998) identify the following opportunities as needed to promote rather than stifle this growth:

- Opportunities to explore the various uses and functions of written language and to develop appreciation and command of them.
- Opportunities to develop and enhance language and metacognitive skills to meet the demands of understanding printed texts.
- Opportunities to experience contexts that promote enthusiasm and success in learning to read and write, as well as learning *by* reading and writing.
- Opportunities for children *likely to experience* difficulties in becoming fluent readers to be identified and to participate in effective prevention programs.

Given these opportunities, young children learn the culturally specific social routines in book reading (Snow and Goldfield, 1982; Snow and Ninio, 1986). They develop expectations that certain kinds of intonations and wording are used with books and other written materials. They interact with the meaning and the print while people read to them. They play with the sounds of words, getting knowledge of the phonological structures of language and how the written units connect with the spoken units. They

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experiment with writing by forming scribbles, random strings of letters, and letter-like forms. There is a direct connection between pre-literacy experiences and the varied levels of reading achievement at the beginning of formal instruction (Snow, et al., 1998).

Although we know a great deal about language and literacy opportunities needed by prekindergarteners, only 37 percent of children entering kindergarten show basic print awareness (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Children living in poverty show considerable lower vocabulary levels than do middle income children and this is even the case with children attending prekindergarten programs (Hart & Risley, 1995; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Are prekindergarten content benchmarks part of the solution? Scholars in early literacy, including those sponsored by the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998), the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning Lab (Bodrova, Leong, Paynter, & Semenov, 2000), the New Standards Project Listening and Speaking Standards (2001), the Head Start Performance Outcomes and many states have worked in collaborative groups to examine the content and suitable presentation of prekindergarten early literacy benchmarks. Their goal is to provide standards/benchmarks that policy makers, administrators, and teachers will find helpful in ensuring that prekindergarten children receive the literacy opportunities documented in recent research as necessary for prekindergateners (Snow et al, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000).

We bring this paper to the attention of policy makers, administrators, and teachers because we believe that age appropriate and well-written clear benchmarks have a crucial role in bringing effective literacy practices to preschool programs. We examine

prekindergarten language and early literacy benchmarks with the following questions in mind:

1. Do existing benchmarks serve as a comprehensive framework for building a curriculum that effectively stimulates literacy growth?
2. Can we build the assessment of the progress of preschool children toward language and literacy competence based on the expectations that are reflected in content benchmarks?

Challenges in Developing and Using Standards and Benchmarks

For standards/benchmarks to serve as a comprehensive framework for building a curriculum and assessment system, first they need to meet minimal procedural challenges to alleviate the difficulty in their comprehension and use. To begin with, different terminology and conceptualizations are used interchangeably (e.g., benchmarks, developmental accomplishments, performance outcomes, standards) and in actual fact their meanings differ. In table 1 are a few commonly used terms and accompanying definitions. The lack of common terminology makes it

Table 1: Some often confused terms and proposed meaning

Term	Definition
Standards	General statement of the knowledge and skills students should gain by the end of their prekindergarten-12 education. These usually stated in terms of specific grade bands, such as Pre-k-Second grade.
Benchmarks	Specific statements that provide definition and clarity to the standards for children at a particular developmental level. These should be measurable.

Performance Outcomes	Behavior expected to be seen if a child has accomplished a particular benchmark.
Developmental Accomplishments	Typical accomplishments for children at a developmental level – these do not account for all maturational or experiential differences between children.
Indicators of Progress	Concepts, knowledge, and skills that students gain at a particular developmental level

difficult to compare across different documents but, more important, it makes the task of implementation harder, since teachers are faced with the prospect of interpreting the intent of the developers and can lead to program level translations that may or may not be faithful to the original intent (Bodrova, Leong, Paynter and Semenov, 2000). We need a common language. To make things worse, the word *standards* is used in three ways: as program standards, as content standards, and as performance standards (for definitions, see Kendall and Marzano, 2000).

A second issue is that the benchmarks must be consistent with the K-12 standards but cannot just be solely derived from them. Providing continuity between Pre-K and K-12 benchmarks is not an easy task that can be solved by making minor adjustments in the language of the K-12 standards documents. For example, Pre-K benchmarks cannot be the K-12 standard with the words "beginning to" attached to them, so "beginning to apply the rules of spelling" is not an acceptable benchmark for prekindergarten. Such benchmarks lead to confusion because they are usually too vague—they don't give an indication of what to expect from a prekindergarten child. Neither can the pre-K benchmark be the K-12 benchmark with the child expectation cut in half. A common K-12 benchmark is the ability to write upper and lower case letters. It would not be appropriate to have a prekindergarten expectation to write half of the letters of the alphabet or letter A-L. Pre-K standards must take into account, for example, that some

lower case letters are more difficult to write than any other letters and that some letters appear more frequently in words. On the other hand, there does have to be a connection between the early childhood benchmarks and those in later grades so that there is continuity in expectations during a very difficult transition period.

Another difficulty - benchmarks are actually activities or what would be done to develop a benchmark. Consider, for example, shared book reading. The activity "Shared book reading" would not be a good example of a benchmark – it is stated in terms of an activity and not a specific knowledge or skill. A better expectation would be "during shared book reading, the child can answer questions about the story or point to the appropriate picture." When stated as an activity, the benchmark will lead to checklists of things to present and do with children. They could change the classroom into a series of unrelated activities that children go through the motions to complete. Benchmarks must be written so that the use of a variety of instructional approaches would lead to their attainment. Young children are differentially responsive to different routes of engagement and develop unevenly – many activities in varied areas of development are proper entry points in enhancing early literacy development.

Early childhood benchmarks must also include the rich research base in the development of specific literacy skills and knowledge. Pre-K Benchmarks must tread a fine line between setting expectations that are too high and not expecting enough from young children. The research used to determine the level of the benchmark must be examined not only for what it tells us about the young child's capacities, but also which young children were used in the study. Were the children at-risk or where they middle class children whose parents are literacy researchers? Pre-K benchmarks cannot be set

by the absolute minimum of what the most at-risk children can do with no instructional support. We know now that prekindergarten children can possess quite a bit of knowledge on early literacy (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Snow et al, 1998). Contrary to long held thinking, we now know that prekindergarten children are able to form abstractions in areas in which they have accumulated a great deal of knowledge. The benchmarks must be set considering all of these issues.

Another consideration in developing benchmarks is whether or not the benchmark can be assessed and whether the assessment method used would be appropriate for young children. Although without a doubt oral language is something that contributes to literacy learning, however it is an area that is very difficult to assess. Many assessment methods appropriate in older grades are not appropriate for young children. At best, assessment in the prekindergarteners often has questionable reliability and validity. Group administered paper-pencil tests are of little value at this age (McAfee & Leong, 2001). Testing sub-skills or parts of concepts does not ensure that a child has mastered a skill or knowledge in its entirety (Shepard, 2001). To compensate for this early childhood teachers must use multiple methods of assessment and observation on a regular basis to determine if students are meeting an acceptable level of proficiency on benchmarks. This evidence must be done on a time-consuming one-on-one basis. Before these assessment are used for "high-stakes" purposes many additional criteria need to be met (Shepard, 2000, see AERA Position Statement Concerning High Stakes Testing in PreK-12 Education at www.aera.net.) One must question if they can be met with this young age group. We know from the experience that in K-12 education there have been practices based on the standards movement that may have negative consequences (e.g.,

grading the schools and having teacher's pay depend on their getting test scores up). Early childhood educators, especially policy makers, must acknowledge and examine these negative aspects of the standards movement. These educators and policy makers must identify, implement, and build upon the benefits of the standards movement without repeating misguided uses of standards.

In summary, standards and benchmarks bring clarity to what should be expected of young children that will help teachers understand how to organize the classroom and provide support for the child's emerging literacy knowledge and skills. However, there are many challenges in both describing these benchmarks in a way that is useful and helpful, rather than restricting and developmentally inappropriate. They need to be developed and presented in a manner that their implementation in prekindergarten programs serves the best interests of young children and their teachers.

Examining Prekindergarten Language and Literacy Standards

Prekindergarten language and literacy standards developed by professional groups [e.g., Head Start Performance Standards (http://www2.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/hsb/regs/regs/rg_index.htm#progperf), International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998), Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning Lab (Bodrova, Leong, Paynter, & Semenov, 2000), New Standards Project (Resnick and Tucker, 2001)have been available in the last five years. These national standards vary in terms of their meeting the basic challenges of being well-written and clearly defined.

During this same time period many states' departments of education have used the above standards and related reports (Snow et al, 1998) to develop their own suggested standards. Some states have incorporated another document in total (e.g., Oregon's use of Head Start Outcomes), others have provided various standards documents for constituents to choose from (e.g., IOWA), and others have adapted most of their items from the national level reports. In this paper we look at the standards documents for the various states as they appear in a particular time frame, October 2001, in order to evaluate the language and the foci of the states' language and literacy pre-kindergarten standards as to their quality.

Do standards/benchmarks developed by states reflect standards that meet the challenges described above? To even think about states standards/benchmarks, we need a model for comparison. We choose to examine two sets of standards/benchmarks as models that meet the challenges described in the previous section. We examine the New Standards Listening and Speaking Standards (Resnick and Tucker, 2001) and A Framework for Early Literacy Instruction: Aligning Standards to Developmental Accomplishments and Student Behaviors (FELI) (Bodrova et al, 2000). We choose these because a) they are an appropriate model; b) together they address listening, speaking, reading and writing; c) they give indicators for professional development therefore the possibility of serving as a comprehensive framework for building a curriculum that effectively stimulates literacy growth (add ERIC citation); and d) because they provide indications of how one could assess the youngest students' literacy development.

In order to develop Early Literacy Standards and Benchmarks, Bodrova, et.al, (2000) identified two major areas in which prekindergarten and kindergarten students

should show improvement prior to formal literacy instruction: (1) knowledge and skills that are precursors to reading; (2) knowledge and skills that are precursors to writing. The New Standards Project identified two major areas, Listening and Speaking. As one would expect, two sets of model standards addressing similar areas of study as these are not mutually exclusive. For clarification we include the following examples of over lap. LS1.1, talking a lot, has an expectation that the preschool child "share and talk daily about their own experiences, products of writing" and RW2.1, purpose of writing..., has an expectation that the child "may pretend to read his or her own message...using words that may differ from the intended message". LS1.4, discussing books, has an expectation that the preschool child "know the front-to-back progression of a book and the left –to-right progression in print" and RW1.2, "conventions of reading...", has as an expectation that child knows how to handle printed materials, how to hold a book to read it, knows about the front and the back of a book. And as a last example, LS3.2, word play, phonological awareness and language awareness, has an expectation that the preschool child "in a string of sounds or words, listen for an identify the first, middle, or last sound or word in the string and RW2.2, alphabetic principle, phonological awareness, sound-to-symbol correspondence, orthographic knowledge, "identifies two or three sounds in a spoken word (usually beginning and ending) and attempts to represent them in writing in the corresponding order". If one were to use a combined system of LS and RW in curriculum and assessment practice, overlap would need to be taken into account.

Do these standards meet the challenges presented earlier in this paper? One reason that we present the LS and RW standards is because we propose that, for the most part, they do meet they both provide enough detail and are well enough written so that

their meaning is clear. We consider these benchmarks to have associated expectations that reflect the state of knowledge in preschool children's listening, speaking, reading, and writing and are written at a level appropriate for preschool children. Consequently, these benchmarks are not too low level as to underestimate what preschool children can learn given intentional instruction, while also not so difficult that they are unrealistic. But there are still some problems however, for example, we have found that some are written in too global of a manner. For example, one of the benchmarks for LS 1.2 reads: "begin to make spontaneous and audible corrections to their own behavior, actions, or language (for example, "Hoppy, I mean happy!" or "I said, 'two,' I meant, 'three!'"). Another example is a benchmark for LS 3.2: "build letter recognition (names and shapes only)."

Can they serve as a comprehensive framework for building a curriculum that effectively stimulates literacy growth? Can we build the assessment of the progress of preschool children toward language and literacy competence based on the expectations that are reflected in the content benchmarks? We can answer both of these questions positively if we stress the fact, that by itself the well-developed set of standards should not be viewed as a panacea but as a mere tool, a system of reference for the development of successful Pre-K language and literacy practices. The standards can only serve as a vehicle for preschool educators to effectively apply them for the purposes of instruction and assessment. The success of the standards practical implementation largely depends on teachers' abilities to reflect on the effectiveness of instructional practices and knowledge of the students' individual as well as other educational supports such as that needed from school administration.

States Standards Development

Early literacy benchmarks have been developed in a number of states. These state documents have recently been studied by a number of research groups (e.g., NAECS/SDE, NCEDL, SERVE, ECS, etc.). We also reviewed a number of state pre-kindergarten standards in order to evaluate the quality of these standards. Expectations for prekindergarten children, as described in early literacy benchmarks, vary from state to state. Some are very basic (e.g., Utah, Florida) as compared to Head Start childhood framework, as used in Oregon, or the framework developed by the state of Texas. Washington could serve as an example of a medium between the two.

The language used in the states' documents also indicates that there is certain indecisiveness regarding the question of which stage of development of abilities should be captured in the language of benchmarks. Many states assume the mastery of abilities (Bodrova, Leong, Paynter, and Semenov, 2000), such as Utah, Colorado, Connecticut, etc. But in case of Texas, Mississippi, Oregon, etc., a very vague description are used, such as begins, attempts, shows increasing awareness, interest, etc.

Making Sense of State's Standards and Benchmarks

In an effort to make sense of the various states prekindergarten benchmarks, we examine states' standards in comparison to the LS and RW standards and benchmarks. In the process of analyzing the state standards as compared to national standards, we

could not help noticing that the development of Speaking and Listening skills was not equally represented across the states' standards documents. Although some directly addressed the areas of Listening and Speaking (e.g., Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, etc.), the wording of the benchmarks often lacked the degree of elaboration that allows benchmarks to become feasible tools designed to assist teachers in their instructional efforts. It is obvious, that such benchmarks as "preschool learners use spoken language for a variety of purposes" or "children will increase their vocabulary" can hardly be suited for any practical implementation.

Other states (e.g., Colorado, District of Columbia, Maine, etc.) did not place special emphasis on Listening and Speaking. Instead, they addressed these areas in connection with the development of other skills, such as reading (e.g., listening to someone read), writing (e.g., dictating their ideas to be written down by an adult), thinking (e.g., predicting logical next steps in a story), etc. Although Reading/Writing and Listening/Speaking are intricately interrelated, we believe that there is a good reason to address Listening and Speaking adequately in states' standards documents, as these areas are crucial components of language and literacy development.

Table 2 contains examples of the state standards that we think best meet the quality criteria discussed above, such as age-appropriateness and clear, precise language. A number of states are not listed for a number of reasons that lead to their lack of specificity, for example, many states' benchmarks included statements such as "begins to ..." mentioned as a problem in previous sections of this paper.

Table 2: Examples of the State Standards

National Standards	Corresponding State Standards
Listening and Speaking (LS)	
Standard 1: Habits	
1.1 Talking a lot	Connecticut Use several sentences, with at least five words in each sentence, to respond to a question or express ideas, thoughts and feelings
1.2 Talking to One's Self	NOT INCLUDED IN ANY STATE STANDARDS
1.3 Conversing at length on a topic	Arizona Converse for 2-3 turns (e.g., using rules of conversing related to initiating conversation, wait time, turn taking, and maintaining topic of conversation) Massachusetts Develop an understanding of the social amenities/proprieties of interaction/interchange and speaking in a group (e.g., taking turns in talking; listening to their peers; waiting until the other person is finished; asking questions and waiting for an answer; gaining the floor in appropriate ways, staying on topic)
1.4 Discussing Books	Colorado Preschool learners know that pictures and print convey meaning, beginning with recognition of symbols, the written form of their own name, and familiar letters or words found in their environment Massachusetts Be actively involved in story reading/telling experiences (e.g., respond to questions; make inferences about characters' motivations; talk about the meaning of words; create rhymes)
Standard 2: Kinds of Talk and Resulting Genres	
2.1 Narrative	Florida Retells specific details of information heard, including sequence of events Texas Tells a simple personal narrative, focusing on favorite or most memorable parts
2.2 Explaining and seeking information	District of Columbia Explains the reasons for a character's action, taking into account the situation and basic motivation of the character New York Explain personal criteria for choosing a book, poem, or a story

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2.3 Getting things done	Massachusetts Listen and respond to one-, two-, then three-step directions
2.4 Producing and responding to performances	Georgia Children will dramatize, tell, and retell poems and stories Massachusetts Dramatize/act out stories during free play. Use language to initiate and enter play situations and communicate with peers through role play, sequence of events, expressing feelings (e.g., dramatizing taking an order at a restaurant/fighting a fire; making rules; negotiating)
Standard 3: Language Use and Connections	
3.1 Rules of Interactions	Florida Recognizes the difference between language that is used at home and language that is used at school. Utah Uses language and vocabulary appropriate to different situations, e.g., home language, playground language, classroom language
3.2 Word play, phonological awareness and language awareness	Minnesota Engage in writing using letter-like symbols to make letters or words Missouri Creates words by substituting one sound for another (e.g., "I like to eat…Apples and Bananas, Opples and Bononos" "Willoby, Wallaby Woo")
3.3 Vocabulary and word choice	South Carolina The student will expand a working, generalized, specialized, and subject-specific vocabulary
Reading and Writing (RW)	
Standard 1: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the reading process.	
1.1 Concepts of print	Maine Make valid observations about the use of words and visual symbols; Demonstrates an understanding that reading is a way to gain information about the world. Oregon* Recognizes a word as a unit of print, or awareness that letters are grouped to form words, and that words are separated by spaces.
1.2 Conventions of	Arizona

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reading, text comprehension	Systematically handle book or materials created for sharing information (e.g., turning pages; locating sections, beginning/middle/end; handling/interacting with menus, bus schedules, and shopping lists) Connecticut Holds a book upright, turn pages from the front of the book to the back, and scan pages from top to bottom and left to right.
1.3 Visual letter recognition	Mississippi Recognizes first name in print. Names some (8-10) letters especially those from own name. Matches same letter (visual discrimination – uppercase to uppercase, lowercase to lowercase) Texas Identifies 10 or more printed alphabet letters
1.4 Sound-to-symbol correspondence, phonological awareness	Oregon* Associates sounds with written words, such as awareness that different words begin with the same sound. Washington Knows some letter sound/name
1.5 Sight word recognition and decoding	District of Columbia Names familiar labels, signs, book titles. New York Recognizes local environmental print.
Standards 2: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.	
2.1 Purpose of writing, text comprehension, oral language development	New Jersey Write (scribble) messages as part of playful activity Ohio Participate in the writing of labels, messages and stories though a variety of literacy activities. Dictate thoughts into words.
2.2 Alphabetic principle, phonological	PRESCHOOL LEVEL SKILLS IN ORAL LANGUAGE AREA RATHER THAN WRITTEN LANGUAGE???
2.3 Letter formation, conventions of writing	NOTHING HERE – STATES THAT HAD THEM STARTED STATEMENT WITH BEGINS TO – REALLY DOESN'T WORK

Conclusion

Any set of benchmarks is neither exhaustive nor incontestable. They should capture highlights of the course of language/literacy acquisition that have been revealed through several decades of convergent evidence found in literacy research. In addition to reflecting this knowledge on early language/literacy, the benchmarks have got to place

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the children's language/literacy competence in the context of the whole child, across developmental areas and in light of differences in experiences. They cannot be downward extensions from other grades with the words "beginning to" attached. The information upon which the benchmark is derived must be explicit to those professionals using the benchmarks.

It is necessary that developers of benchmarks provide support for understanding their meaning, as opposed to presenting activities to implement without understanding. The relationship between prekindergarten benchmarks and those for younger and older children must be clear. The early childhood education community and policy makers are obligated to provide professional development, appropriate curriculum materials, and necessary resources for successful use of benchmarks. Precautions need to be taken so that the mistakes of standards movements with older children are not replicated with prekindergarten children. Developers need to prepare standards documents that possess clarity while at the same time are appealing (see Minnesota for such a document.) Benchmarks need to be written keeping in mind statements that might encourage mediocrity in our programs for young children. They should provide support for early childhood educators in their efforts to enhance young children's positive disposition toward literacy, one that respects young children's creativity and diversity, while promoting literacy development.

The quality of the state documents that we have examined indicates that a considerable step toward the development of age-appropriate and clearly written benchmarks has already been made. Still, we cannot underestimate the importance of using a precise, clear language when writing content benchmarks if we attempt to

develop a truly comprehensive framework for prekindergarten instruction and assessment. In order to address the knowledge and skills that are currently expected from the children by the time that they enter the school system, the standards should reflect the latest research findings in early childhood literacy and early childhood development. The inadequate representation of the language knowledge and listening/speaking skills in many of the state documents is alarming, as the development of these skills is continuously emphasized in the research literature as important benchmarks of early childhood development.

Below we list the major points that must be considered in the development of prekindergaten benchmarks.

- Need for a common language
- Need to be consistent with K-12 expectations but developmentally appropriate
- Should be stated in terms of a specific knowledge or skill as opposed to an activity
- Need to be grounded in research but in a reflective manner
- Need to be used with reflection as opposed to be followed blindly
- Many state benchmarks are not ready for implementation because of language
- L/S not emphasized in the state documents

We consider these factors to be instrumental in creating a system of reference that early childhood educators can use to inform and effectively modify their instructional practices in a prekindergarten classroom. Addressing them could become a part of a considerable qualitative change in early childhood education.

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